DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 074 454 CS 000 403

AUTHOR Artley, A. Sterl
TITLE Identifying Good Teachers of Reading. Successful Teachers of Reading, Who are They?
PUB DATE May 73
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Reading Association (18th, Denver, Colorado, May 1-4, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Effective Teaching; Librarians; *Parent Role; Reading Development; *Reading Habits; Reading Instruction; *Reading Interests; Resource Staff Role; Student Attitudes; *Teacher Evaluation; Teacher Role; *Teaching Styles

ABSTRACT

Approximately 100 junior and senior education majors in a basic reading methods course answered these questions: (1) from what you can recall, what did your teachers (on any level) do that you feel promoted your competence and interest in reading? (2) was there anything that your teachers did that detracted from your interest in reading? (3) was there someone or something besides your teacher who contributed to your competence and interest in reading? From their answers several generalized observations about the school reading programs and teachers as these students remember them are made. Teachers' oral reading is frequently mentioned as most enjoyable and stimulating. Creative teaching and teacher enthusiasm are recalled as prime motivators while repetitive drill and dull reading classes are listed as negative influences. School librarians often served as an inspiration to these students. The major influence for all these students was the parents or family. Most had been read to as children, had parents who read for pleasure, had books and magazines readily available in the home, and were encouraged (but not pressured) to read for enjoyment and information. (TO)

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A. Sterl Artley
Professor of Education
University of Missouri --
Columbia
409 General Classroom Bldg.
University of Missouri
Columbia, Missouri 65201

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IDENTIFYING GOOD TEACHERS OF READING

Successful Teachers of Reading - Who Are They

Wednesday, May 2, 2:00

I wish I knew - for sure. I wish we had well established research data that would identify the characteristics and practices of teachers of reading that produce both skillful and interested readers. In spite of all the research that has been done on teacher effectiveness, we have little valid information relative to the understandings they should have and the activities they should carry on in specific teaching areas,

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whether they be science, mathematics, or reading.

The majority of studies of teacher effectiveness have dealt with the systematic observation and analysis of the verbal communication taking place between teachers and pupils. Though the generalizations from these studies have peeipheral relation to reading instruction, they fail to identify specific teacher behaviors and practices that are unique to reading instruction, and most of all, that would show a positive correlation with pupil achievement and interest. It is not enough to identify the "good teacher"; we must identify and describe the good teacher of reading if the infomation is to be of help in the preparation of reading teachers.

Not having at hand research information of the kind I indicated, I thought first of trying to delineate teacher characteristics and behaviors that I would associate with effective teaching, growing out of my own experience in working with and observing teachers in classroom

situations. To supplement my observations I hit on another idea. This semester I have approximately one hundred junior and senior education majors in classes in our basic reading methods course. I decided to ask them what they could recall of their own reading experiences that indicated effective or ineffective teaching--that turned them on or off reading. What they told me was so perceptive and pertinent that I decided to ignore my own ideas and report to you a summary of what they told me.

I asked them to make a written response to these three questions:

1. From what you can recall, what did your teachers (on any level) do that you feel promoted your competence and interest in reading?
2. In the same manner was there anything that your teachers did that detracted from your interest in reading?
3. Was there someone or something

besides your teacher who contributed to your competence and interest in reading?

All of us are aware of the many limitations from data derived in this manner, the chief one being that it is difficult for one to recall over a period of from ten to fifteen years precisely what did occur when he was in school. Yet, I think, you will see that the responses of these students throw a great deal of light on teacher practices that had either positive or negative influence on their reading behavior.

First, I am forced to report that a surprisingly large number of students confessed that they could recall little if anything that their teachers did that contributed to their reading development. Their instruction seemed to be in the gray zone, rather "blah." One student wrote, "I don't recall my teachers doing very much to promote my interest in reading." "I don't remember ever really being encouraged to read when I

was in school. Reading was just another subject to be learned," another said. And a young man wrote, "My teachers basically did nothing that promoted either my competence or my interest in reading."

Though these responses and many others like them give us little that we can use to get at specific teacher behaviors, they tell us clearly that some teachers missed the opportunity to make reading the most important, the most thrilling activity of the day. These young people are the products of uninspired and uninspiring instruction, where neither the influence of teachers nor their own internal motivation compensated for their colorless instruction.

But the picture is not all that bleak for there were many others, the majority, who attested to many commendable practices. By far, the greatest number said that the reading done by their teachers to the class or group was the thing they remembered and enjoyed most. And, by the way, this was done by teachers on all levels, even junior high school. In

some cases the teacher read the opening chapter of a book or an interesting episode from it as a starter, the pupil then finishing for himself, in some instances having to wait his turn because of the book's sudden popularity. Other teachers on chosen days read a book to completion chapter by chapter. Usually this would be one on the interest level but a step or two above the reading level of the majority. Some students reported that their teachers frequently talked about books they thought some of them might enjoy, and in other cases a teacher told about an adult book that he was reading for his own information or enjoyment. In this way the pupils saw that reading was important to the teacher also.

Related to the above was the free time that a number of the teachers made available in the daily or weekly schedule for personal reading. For a given period of time everyone read, including the teacher. In some cases the teacher

used a portion of this time for pupil-teacher conferences over books read, but chiefly, the student reported, it was just a time to enjoy an exciting story or informative article with everyone reading. This activity, reported by the students as being so conducive to reading interest as well as to personal development, is one so rewarding that no teacher should by-pass its use.

The students made frequent reference to a number of activities used by their teachers to lend variety to the day's schedule of events and break the stereotyped pattern of instruction. Mentioned here were such things as dramatizations, puppetry, games, puzzles, use of all kinds of audio-visual aids, art and music activities, and creative writing. Some of the activities grew out of the reading that was in progress; in other cases the activity triggered off additional related reading. Reading was far more than what was contained in self-help drill books,

programmed frames, phonics drill exercises or what was between the covers of a basal reader. There was variation from day to day. Reading was an exciting activity. And it was fun.

Many of the students confirmed what one would expect--that stimulation for reading grew out of the sheer fun of experiencing an abundance of good things to read. Books were readily available in a school library or materials center, and the pupils were given time to survey, sample, check out, read, and return their books. They could make their own choices of what they wanted to read, and, most important, they were given time to read. One good book led to another--and another. Some of the students recalled belonging to book clubs, giving them an opportunity to build their own personal libraries. Others, through accident or teacher recommendation, discovered books or magazines that related to a hobby. In still other cases the teacher capitalized on an interest that a child showed in one

of the content subjects and used it as a spring-board into related areas--fiction and non-fiction.

Another factor mentioned by a number of student as having motivational value, but which at the same time had interesting side effects, was the teacher's use of awards. These were of various types--gold stars, wall progress charts, stickers, and graphs. In our state we still have as a perserverance of the past something called the Reading Circle. If each year the pupil reads a given number of books in specified categories such as fiction, biography, poetry, etc., he is awarded a certificate and seal. Many stated that they were motivated to read to get these awards. But the interesting feature of this type of activity was that those turned on by it appeared to be the high achievers who used it as a prestige builder. In a very obvious manner they could demonstrate to their less fortunate peers how well they were doing. While it turned these child-

ren on, as we shall see shortly, it turned others off--with a vengeance. In fact a number of the students, now as adults, were quite aware of these as extrinsic awards and doubted their value.

Many of the students commented about the personalized attention that they had received as pupils. Different types were mentioned--recognition and praise for work well done, recommendation of books that related to special interest, help with material not understood, special instruction on return to school after an illness, and others. For those of you in this group who may be special reading teachers, I want you to know that at least one student paid special tribute to you. She wrote, "I was tutored three days a week for four or five months. Mrs. C. gave me the confidence and skill I was lacking. As a result of her patience and instruction my reading grade rose from a C to an A. After I became a better reader I became interested in reading and I was proud of myself for the

progress I had made."

Other responses from these students indicated something they had difficulty in making specific. They referred to such teacher attributes as enthusiasm, personality, and favorable attitude toward reading. One student summarized it as follows: "My first grade teacher was simply a good teacher. She gave us each a chance and made us feel good about what we did." In fact, this undefinable "good teacher" is evident in all that we have said. His imagination, his enthusiasm for reading, his creativity, his thrill over seeing children develop under his guidance, even his ingeniousness have been evidenced in a variety of behaviors. For such teachers, reading is the most important activity that takes place during the day. It is fun. Even practice and drill are coated with "gameness," and the end result, in my student's words was, "...we feel good about what we did."

But unfortunately we must turn the coin to the other side--"What did your

teachers do that turned you off?" And what the students said about the negative effects of their instruction was as informative as the positive.

I mentioned at the beginning that I was disturbed over the fact that so many of the students could recall little that was done to influence their reading. With frequency their responses were, "In my opinion, there was essentially nothing in the elementary curriculum that helped to develop my interest in reading," or "I do not remember every really being encouraged to read when I was in grade school". Paralleling such comments but with a still more negative import were those that indicated in one way or another that reading was just plain boring. A number of reasons for this were given. Too much skill drill seemed to be one. One student put it this way, "Practically all the emphasis was placed on the development of reading skills, or growth <u>in</u> reading. Very little was done to promote growth through reading, or to enjoy and apply what was read." Another said, "Reading was just another sub-

ject to be learned. It was never presented in a unique or interesting way....I hated to read. I looked upon it more as a chore than something enjoyable." Still another, "Never was I encouraged to learn to read for the sake of reading," and, "The teacher made it so much of a chore I decided reading was something I wasn't supposed to like."

Many teacher activities turned up in the responses that were more specific as to what teacher did that tended to make reading "something they weren't supposed to like." The students complained about the reading period being a "stereotyped activity"--no variation in procedure, always the same--silent reading (or reading round), factual questions, phonics drill, work book--with the same thing repeated the next day.

Purposeless and undifferentiated use of workbooks and other practice material came in for their full share of criticism. One said, "I didn't mind practicing something when I could see a reason for it, but we were never told what the purpose was." Another, a high achiever I presume, said,

"I didn't see the reason for doing all the workbook pages when they were so repetitious and I always got all of them right." So called, "self-instruction" materials received a negative vote for the same reason, as did reading-rate drill, and various types of programmed materials where children had no opportunity to react, respond or be stimulated by others in a group. Children were able to detect busy-work activities and they resented their use. One young man just said he had an "unstimulated" teacher.

But if you are looking for two negative "ringers," two things that teachers should never be guilty of doing if they are serious about making reading a stimulating and vital activity, according to these junior and senior college students, is to require book reports over voluntary reading, and to conduct a reading class as an oral reading round or round-robin activity. As to the first, a student wrote, "We were required to read a certain number of books in each of several categories....Reading the different types of books did serve to stimulate my interest

somewhat. But all of this was destroyed when I had to write a report that had to be of specified length and include certain information." And this from a student who, when in the elementary grades caught on to the tricks of the trade. "The greatest hindrance to my reading...was having to write book reports. Book reports were a requirement from third grade on, and I often would just read the blurb on the cover of books that looked interesting..." When required, oral as well as written reports were commented on unfavorably by several respondents. It is striking that in spite of all that has been said and written about the blighting effects of required book reports, some teachers still persist in using them.

The same statement could be made about round-robin oral reading. I know of no reading authority who would condone this type of activity, and certainly students could recall its use with contempt. The same student who criticized book reports said, "Reading aloud was another negative

experience. It was terribly embarrassing to stand up and read a paragraph in front of the class. I counted the number of children ahead of me and figured out which paragraph I would have to read. Instead of listening to the other children I would practice my paragraph so I wouldn't be embarrassed by stumbling over a word." In the same vein another wrote, "During reading class we would sit in a circle and each read a sentence, one-by-one...I was a fast reader and this was disturbing, especially when a slow reader had to read." How this could make reading anything other than a disliked and boring activity is difficult to imagine.

Competitive activities and extrinsic awards used to motivate reading were frowned upon by many. One student described such a typical activity. "My teacher had a bulletin board display titled, 'Can Your Rocketship Reach the Moon?' For every book one read he would move the rocketship one step closer to the moon. This always seemed pointless to me since some of us selected only thin books, and others read only enough

of the pages to get the gist of the story." An honest slow reader would likely orbit the earth for the whole year with this device as the motivational force. One good reader saw the fallacy of such an activity. Her teacher had her color a clown's balloon for each book read, but she added, "This may have promoted interest, but possibly made voluntary reading too competitive, since we all could see how many books everyone had read." The reward for reading is most effective when it is intrinsic; when the fun, thrill, and satisfaction that one derives from reading a poem, a story or informative article has relevance for the reader. Gold starts and symbol stickers can never equal the thrill of reading Charlotte's Web.

One other thing mentioned frequently as a deterrent to reading interest, and I fear growth as well, was that of being "frozen" into reading groups, especially the one at the bottom. In many situations the only grouping that was done was in reading, and once in a group the pupil was labeled, and by the teacher's word and

action he becomes a reading reject. Group work or "committee" work should be in progress throughout the school day with children working with each other in many different kinds of activities and relationships. In this manner children escape the deleterious effects and warped self-concepts growing out of being placed in one inflexible group.

Time does not permit a discussion of other teacher practices that turned these students off as young readers. I will only indicate what some of them were. One was assigned "free" reading, that is, having free reading prescribed in terms of lists, categories, etc. Teacher threats used to encourage achievement--censure before others, unfavorable comparisions, subtle but self-concept damaging comments, and test results announced or posted as threats. Another, though not stated in so many words, was the failure to personalize instruction. It showed up in so many of the student's recollections. In some cases they said they had been ignored because they were good readers, but others felt they had been

ignored because they showed little interest in reading. Still others could recall situations where they needed help over a hurdle, but a teacher failed to heed their call. A few felt that their reading content was not related to their particular interests. One might counter such comments as these by saying that a teacher was misinterpreted, or that she didn't mean something the way a child took it. However, if a person feels a certain way, the feeling and the cause are just as real as though facts existed to prove the case--and just as harmful too.

But just a paragraph or two about the responses to the third question--"Was there someone or something besides your teachers who contributed to your competence and interest in reading?" Overwhelmingly the responses indicated the the major influence was the parents or family. In the majority of cases the parents had read to them as children, even as very young children. Time during the day had been set aside as the story time. Books and magazines, children's as well as adult's, were available in the

home. Over again the students recalled seeing their parents read, thus evidencing to them that reading was important. Without showing anxiety, parents indicated an interest in school, and frequently talked with their children about their reading and tne interesting things their teachers were doing. In some cases the students could recall that they read to their parents or members of the family.

The influence of the home, appeared to be much greater than one ordinarily thinks. This being true it appears that teachers might make a contribution to pupil growth by more deliberately involving the parents of their children in what is being done in reading. Several things might be suggested. For example, establishing communication with the home so that parents are informed about the reading activities being carried on, along with suggestions that parents might follow to supplement instruction. It goes without saying that regular teacher-parent conferences should be organized so that each can share with the other information

and ideas that will facilitate reading. Parents can lend tremendous support to the reading program if they are taken into confidence and made full-fledged partners in the education process.

And finally we must recognize the influence of librarians, public as well as school, for they were mentioned frequently. They took a personal interest in children, helped in their book selections, recommended books that might interest particular children, cooperated with teachers in special activities related to reading, conducted reading campaigns, and otherwise played a major role in supporting the school's reading efforts. One student showed her appreciation for her librarian when she said, "Beyond the reading environment provided by my home, the school librarian had the greatest influence on me. She knew me and my interests and she challenged my abilities. She became my very close friend." -- a tribute that I am sure could be shared by many librarians.

Who are the successful teachers of reading? The information provided by these education majors gives us additional insight into some teacher practices that appear to have a positive or negative influence on the development of their

competence and interest in reading. Though rather difficult to generalize from what they have said, their responses do seem to tell us that teachers who sense the importance of reading as a vital force in the development of young people, who see reading as the most important activity that they will carry on during the day, and who are able to convey that conviction through their enthusiasm, and creative teaching, produce children who are likely to enjoy reading, and, hence, be efficient readers. Their responses tell us, too, that along with what teachers do in the classroom, the support given by the home and library play a very significant role in the development of reading interests and competencies.